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ABSTRACT

The number of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) cases has fallen in the past 4 years, and there is disagreement over the cause. Credit has been given to "waiver" programs that resembled Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and to the growing economy. This sort of confusion over program effects is partly a consequence of poor information about what, and when, policies are implemented in the states. Even if state welfare reforms clearly have an effect on caseloads, it is impossible to assign responsibility to any particular provision. The basic conclusions and disagreements of the few systematic studies of the factors affecting AFDC caseloads concern the impact of three types: economic, demographic, and policy. A central problem in deciding whether state waivers account for changes in caseloads is determining what policies were actually implemented. Despite the enormous amount of new information that states must collect and report under TANF, little provides clues about program implementation. The Rockefeller Institute is addressing this issue by examining the implementation of welfare and other social policies through their management systems. State research teams will classify state welfare systems according to goal clusters and determine what the states are actually putting into effect. The initial list of goal clusters includes supporting work and work-related activities; antidependency or welfare avoidance; ensuring correct eligibility decisions; family well-being; influencing family structures and relationships; and minimizing program costs to state governments. (YLB)

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The Relationship of the Decline in Welfare Cases to the New Welfare Law

How Will We Know If It Is Working?

Thomas L. Gais with the assistance of
Donald J. Boyd and Elizabeth L. Davis

"A lot of people said that welfare reform would never work because the private economy wouldn't do its part, or the government wouldn't do its part, or we couldn't figure out how to get people from welfare to work. . . . But a year later, I think it's fair to say the debate is over. We know welfare reform works."
President Bill Clinton
August 12, 1997, St. Louis

Friday, August 22nd, is the first anniversary of President Clinton's signing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. The Act replaced a New Deal entitlement program — Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) — with block grants that gave the states the flexibility to design their own welfare programs. The Act also included financial incentives and disincentives for states, most of which were linked to program outcomes, such as work participation rates for parents and the number of out-of-wedlock pregnancies in the state. It also placed restrictions on states' use of federal funds, such as a five-year limit on receiving benefits over a person's lifetime.

However, even though AFDC was replaced on July 1st by a new program — Temporary Assistance for Needy Families — there is still debate over recent trends in AFDC caseloads. The number of cases has fallen in the last four years, and there is disagreement over its causes. President Clinton has argued that the declining number of AFDC cases demonstrated that the "waiver" programs granted by the Bush and Clinton administrations — programs that often resembled TANF with its emphasis on work and time limits — "worked" by encouraging poor families to be independent. Others have claimed that the growing economy accounted for most if not all of the decline by making it easier for parents to find and keep jobs.

Analyses of the causes of caseload trends are not conclusive. This report summarizes the major points of agreement and disagreement. But we have larger points to make. First, this sort of confusion over program effects

***The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government**, the public policy research arm of the State University of New York, was established in 1982 to bring the resources of the 64-campus SUNY system to bear on public policy issues. The Institute is active nationally in research on the role of state governments in American federalism and the management and finances of state and local governments in major areas of domestic public affairs.*

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— such as caseload changes — is partly a consequence of poor information about what, and when, policies are implemented in the states. Unfortunately, federal welfare reforms — despite their extensive reporting requirements — will not remedy the problem, since the new data collection and reporting requirements provide little information about state administrative activities and priorities. Second, even if it is clear that state welfare reforms have an effect on caseloads, it is virtually impossible to assign responsibility to any particular provision unless one examines, in detail, how the new administrative process operates and who it is most likely to affect, at what point, and in what way. Both of these arguments suggest the need to rethink what specific kinds of information are most needed when assessing welfare reforms.

The Facts

Data for May 1997 on the number of AFDC-Basic cases[1] in the 50 states and the District of Columbia showed another drop, to 3,607,222 households, from 3,623,255 in April. This continues the steep fall in welfare cases since March of 1994, when the number of cases peaked at 4,656,332. That 38 month decline came after a 56-month-long *increase* in cases, from 3,514,233 in July of 1989, a growth of 32.5 percent percent between July of 1989 and March of 1994 (see Figure 1).

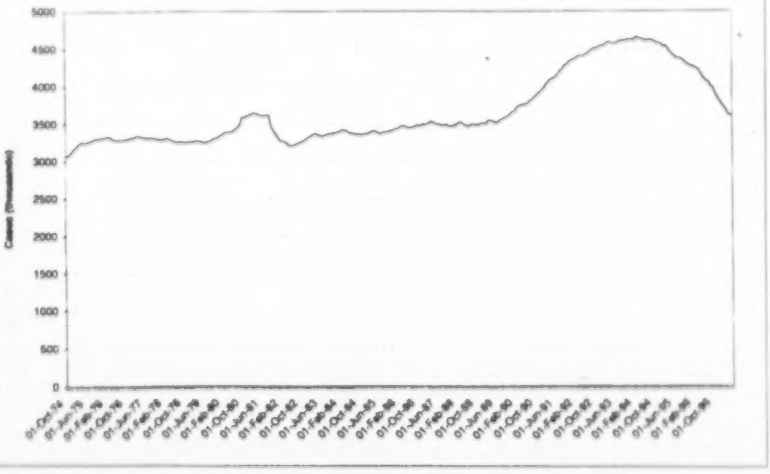
The recent drop in welfare cases has been widely though not equally distributed among the states. Table 1 shows the number of AFDC-Basic cases for each state at three points in time: May, 1997, the most recent month for which data are available; March 1994, when national caseload data peaked after a long-running increase; and July 1989, the month that preceded the sharp growth of cases. These three dates mark the rise and decline of AFDC cases. The table lets us compare how different states contributed to these national trends. Forty-nine states and the District of Columbia saw a decline since March of 1994; only Hawaii showed a slight increase. The Rocky Mountain, Southeast, and Great Lakes states showed the greatest declines. States in the Far West showed the smallest decrease, with the Northeast, the Middle Atlantic, and Plains states in between.

Analyses and Interpretations

There have been only a few systematic studies of the factors affecting AFDC caseloads. Their basic conclusions and disagreements concern the impact of three types of factors on caseloads:

1. *Economic Factors:* Welfare caseloads are clearly related to the economy (Blank 1997; Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) 1997; Fein 1996; Congressional Budget Office (CBO) 1993). Increases in unemployment tend to be followed within 1-2 years by increases in welfare caseloads. Analysts do not agree on the magnitude of the increase, there is however general agreement that a one percent increase in the unemployment rate could lead to a caseload increase in the range of 2-5 percent.

Figure 1
AFDC-Basic Cases, October 1974-May 1997



1. AFDC-Basic is that part of the program that provides payments to single parent households and their children. Another component, AFDC-Unemployed Parent (AFDC-UP), pays money to low-income married couples and their children. AFDC-UP represents only a small part of the overall caseload (only about 10 percent) and, until very recently, it was available in only about half of the states, which makes it hard to interpret trends. Blank (1997) found that the two types of programs responded to somewhat different factors.

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Table 1. Tracing the National Rise and Fall of AFDC-Basic Cases Through the States

	Baseline (July 1989)	*National Peak (March 1994)*	*Most Recent (May 1997)*	*Percent Change* 1989-94	1994-97
New England	***169,025***	***226,445***	***176,589***	***34.0%***	***-22.0%***
Connecticut	37,340	57,194	51,829	53.2	-9.4
Maine	17,327	20,819	17,373	20.2	-16.6
Massachusetts	87,517	106,412	72,919	21.6	-31.5
New Hampshire	5,142	11,232	8,028	118.4	-28.5
Rhode Island	15,078	22,158	19,214	47.0	-13.3
Vermont	6,621	8,640	7,226	30.5	-16.4
Mid Atlantic	***683,500***	***874,356***	***709,114***	***27.9%***	***-18.9%***
Delaware	7,311	11,681	9,392	59.8	-19.6
District of Columbia	17,775	27,155	23,691	52.8	-12.8
Maryland	62,467	80,241	56,990	28.5	-29.0
New Jersey	100,260	118,468	96,700	18.2	-18.4
New York	328,781	436,639	367,382	32.8	-15.9
Pennsylvania	166,906	200,172	154,959	19.9	-22.6
Great Lakes	***700,231***	***798,448***	***571,379***	***14.0%***	***-28.4%***
Illinois	194,209	229,456	184,770	18.1	-19.5
Indiana	51,264	69,936	43,220	36.4	-38.2
Michigan	187,127	198,607	132,756	6.1	-33.2
Ohio	197,031	230,499	172,645	17.0	-25.1
Wisconsin	70,600	69,950	37,988	-0.9	-45.7
Plains	***192,050***	***238,499***	***185,449***	***24.2%***	***-22.2%***
Iowa	32,081	36,698	26,097	14.4	-28.9
Kansas	23,044	28,201	19,224	22.4	-31.8
Minnesota	47,576	57,322	49,737	20.5	-13.2
Missouri	64,092	88,544	68,402	38.2	-22.7
Nebraska	13,264	14,954	12,786	12.7	-14.5
North Dakota	5,429	5,740	4,116	5.7	-28.3
South Dakota	6,564	7,040	5,087	7.3	-27.7
Southeast	***759,818***	***1,071,231***	***745,235***	***41.0%***	***-30.4%***
Alabama	44,569	50,187	34,190	12.6	-31.9
Arkansas	23,966	25,759	20,744	7.5	-19.5
Florida	121,984	241,354	164,419	97.9	-31.9
Georgia	93,258	140,649	103,317	50.8	-26.5
Kentucky	58,325	73,904	61,464	26.7	-16.8
Louisiana	91,968	85,527	53,234	-7.0	-37.8
Mississippi	59,740	57,356	38,073	-4.0	-33.6
North Carolina	78,253	128,349	94,654	64.0	-26.3
South Carolina	35,375	51,174	31,139	44.7	-39.2
Tennessee	70,958	107,870	64,334	52.0	-40.4
Virginia	54,213	75,255	51,312	38.8	-31.8
West Virginia	27,209	33,847	28,355	24.4	-16.2
Southwest	***276,711***	***422,739***	***302,891***	***52.8%***	***-28.4%***
Arizona	37,047	69,965	52,099	88.9	-25.5
New Mexico	20,053	32,014	26,181	59.6	-18.2
Oklahoma	35,734	46,800	29,227	31.0	-37.5
Texas	183,877	273,960	195,384	49.0	-28.7
Rocky Mountain	***67,254***	***82,966***	***57,397***	***23.4%***	***-30.8%***
Colorado	33,302	40,470	29,331	21.5	-27.5
Idaho	5,967	8,329	7,334	39.6	-11.9
Montana	8,137	10,972	6,990	34.8	-36.3
Utah	14,812	17,544	11,536	18.4	-34.2
Wyoming	5,036	5,681	2,206	12.8	-61.2
Far West	***665,644***	***924,904***	***809,371***	***38.9%***	***-12.5%***
Alaska	7,322	10,954	10,535	49.6	-3.8
California	536,531	754,980	664,993	40.7	-11.9
Hawaii	13,397	19,190	19,361	43.2	0.9
Nevada	7,452	13,924	11,378	86.8	-18.3
Oregon	30,612	38,998	22,722	27.4	-41.7
Washington	70,330	86,858	80,382	23.5	-7.5
Sum of States	***3,514,233***	***4,639,628***	***3,557,425***	***32.0%***	***-23.3%***

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However, the economy by itself cannot explain what happened to caseloads in recent years. The mild recession of 1990-91 can, at best, account for only a small portion of the sharp rise in welfare cases between 1989 and 1994 (Blank 1997). The sustained economic growth since 1994 may explain a greater proportion of the current decline in caseloads. For example, an analysis by the President's Council of Economic Advisers estimated that 44 percent of the decline was the result of the improving economy (CEA 1997).

2. *Demographic Factors:* Changes in family structures and the age distribution of citizens — especially the frequency with which households are headed by a mother who has never married — may help explain the sharp run-up in caseloads in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Gabe 1992). During the 1980s, the percentage of children born to women who had never married grew from 5.0 percent of all children in 1984 to 8.2 percent in 1992. These families were especially likely to qualify for AFDC.

However, demographic changes do not seem to explain the recent decline in caseloads, since the percentage of children born to never-married women continued to grow after the beginning of the downturn in 1994, though the rate of growth has declined. However, all of these statistical relationships are tentative, since precise demographic data at the state level are hard to get.

3. *Policy Factors:* It is possible that state welfare reforms — that is, AFDC waivers — played a role in recent caseload declines. There are, indeed, correlations between waiver approvals and caseload declines. However, the precise relationship is still not clear.

First, the studies have had a hard time squaring the timing of caseload changes with the timing of policy changes: much of the caseload decline actually preceded waiver approval and program implementation. In both the CEA report and an analysis by Rebecca Blank (1997), waivers appear to have their greatest impact in the year *before* the waiver is approved. The CEA argued that potential welfare recipients probably monitored state policy initiatives and viewed the proposed waiver as a future "threat," to which they responded by getting off welfare (if they were already on) or not applying in the first place (if they were not).

The State Capacity Study

The State Capacity Study is a multi-year research project on state management systems for welfare, Medicaid, and workforce development programs. The research includes two major rounds of intensive field research in 21 states, with each state study led by a research director, usually as scholar who works in the state and has extensive knowledge of the state's programs and administrative systems. The research will yield major reports as well as a series of Management Briefs.

To date, the study is funded by grants from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, St. Luke's Charitable Health Trust, the Flinn Foundation, the Gund Foundation, the Fund for New Jersey, and the Schumann Fund for New Jersey.

Thomas L. Gais is project director of the State Capacity Study. He is a political scientist and has written extensively on political reform. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. Richard P. Nathan is principal investigator of the study. He is director of the Rockefeller Institute and provost of the Rockefeller College at the University at Albany. To contact Gais or Nathan, call (518) 443-5844 or send an e-mail to fedgroup@rockinst.org. Our fax number is (518) 443-5823.

States in the field research sample include:

Arizona	Minnesota	Rhode Island
California	Mississippi	Tennessee
Florida	Missouri	Texas
Georgia	New Jersey	Utah
Kansas	New York	Washington

Blank, in contrast, speculated that state administrators may have implemented the policies — or some aspects of them — through less formal actions before the waivers were approved.

Second, the findings are inconsistent regarding which policies affect caseloads. Blank's estimated equations suggested that family caps had the largest correlation with caseload declines, but as she notes, it is hard to explain why family caps would have this sort of short-term effect. In contrast, the analysis by the CEA found that JOBS sanctions had the biggest effect on caseloads. More generally, both studies found instability in the estimated relationships between policies and caseloads as they tried slightly different models. This point is important to research being undertaken by the Rockefeller Institute as explained below.

Third, state-by-state comparisons uncover many anomalies. For example, Pennsylvania and New Jersey underwent similar economic cycles and showed very similar patterns of caseload growth and decline. But New Jersey had federal waivers — including JOBS sanctions — while Pennsylvania was one of the few states that did not. Of course, it is possible that New Jersey's waiver was never fully implemented, since the administration of its welfare system relies so heavily on its semi-autonomous counties. We just don't know, since implementation data are not routinely collected.

States as Laboratories

A central problem in deciding whether state waivers account for changes in caseloads is therefore determining what policies were actually implemented. Yet data on implementation under AFDC were sketchy at best. Unfortunately, despite the enormous amount of new information that states must collect and report under TANF, little of that information will provide clues about program implementation.

TANF was innovative in many ways: in its assumptions about federalism, in its treatment of poor families — and in its underlying management philosophy. AFDC attempted to control state implementation by regulating the administrative activities and structure of state and local agencies. However, TANF eliminated most of the regulations of administrative process and structure with a new, information-based management style, backed by financial incentives.

Most of TANF's reporting and incentives requirements relate to program outcomes, such as the number of recipients who are working, the number of hours they work, the reasons they leave the welfare rolls, the number of children in poverty, and the family structure of recipient households. States are required to make an ever-growing proportion of parents work or reduce their caseloads from their 1994 levels — or some combination of both. TANF also sets up competition among states on other outcome criteria, such as reducing out-of-wedlock births.

This performance-based style of management is familiar to people who have followed the latest trends in public management. And, in fact, it has a lot to offer. The basic idea is to give state and local administrators flexibility in designing and administering their programs, while holding them accountable for "results." But if there is to be any learning from policy and managerial variations, it is also critical to know what is actually being done: which laws or provisions have received the most emphasis as a result of the myriad of decisions made by local managers; whether laws are being implemented at all; or even whether administrators are interpreting the laws in quite innovative and surprising ways.

Yet TANF requires little information to be collected and reported about the *content* of state and local welfare reform. We may be able to see major changes in caseloads, poverty rates, and workforce participation. But, just as we have seen in attempts to interpret the effects of welfare waivers, there is little information on *what, if anything, about the state programs might be causing the changes.* States must report the kinds of work activities in which recipient adults were engaged; the total state expenditures for needy families and for transitional services to families who are no longer eligible for public assistance under TANF; and the "type and amount of assistance received under the programs."

But though these provisions require some information about how a state is treating poor families, they fail to indicate, for example, whether welfare workers are explaining the laws to welfare recipients and making them aware of the new "signals" intended by the reforms; whether those workers are competent to

determine that participants are employable and what barriers they face; whether resources are available for employment and training services as well as child care; whether service contracts are negotiated and enforced for social services throughout the state; and whether information systems are adequate not only to provide the reports required by the federal government but also to keep track of families and their treatments as they move through the new system of work activities and sanctions.

To push a common metaphor, if the federal government is offering the states an opportunity to experiment with welfare programs, the laboratory erected by TANF provides ample opportunities for creating variance in policies and management methods. It is also equipped — with its new reporting requirements and upgrading of national surveys — to monitor the outcomes that the programs were designed to affect. What's missing is a careful recording of what's going into the experiments. It is as if we do not know, or remember, exactly what we put into our laboratory beakers.

State Capacity Study

In work now underway at the Rockefeller Institute — launched by a $2 million grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation — we are addressing this issue by examining the implementation of welfare and other social policies through their management systems. This research in 21 states is rooted in a classification scheme to understand what kinds of new welfare policies are actually being implemented. We seek to understand the types of welfare systems delivered to participants by examining where states are putting their money and staff; by looking at the performance and other evaluative criteria in contracts and memoranda of understanding with public and private service providers; by discerning the special capabilities, and incapacities, of their management information systems; and by investigating other aspects of state and local management systems.

In our first round of research for the "State Capacity Study" — which began this summer and will continue through December of this year — scholars and policy analysts in the sample states are examining state management systems to determine *what* the states are putting into effect. Among other things, our state research teams will classify state welfare systems according to the basic purposes, or goal clusters, that give them their distinctive structure. Our initial list of goal clusters includes:

1. *Supporting work and work-related activities.* A system high on this dimension would place emphasis on moving applicants or participants into jobs or job-preparation activities. It would make employment and training services readily available to clients. Like the federal TANF program, the state might stress work-related outcomes in its management philosophy through a system of reporting requirements, program evaluations, and financial incentives. It would build a management information system that could track people through work assignments and histories. And it would require a "cultural change" in many local welfare offices such that traditional eligibility concerns — which often placed special burdens on persons with earnings — are replaced by procedures that lighten the load on working recipients.
2. *Anti-dependency or welfare avoidance.* A system that stresses this orientation would do as much as possible to signal that welfare is a temporary and inadequate solution to personal economic problems. Some states may also signal that receiving welfare is not really ethical. These signals may be indicated by a vigorous diversion program, an emphasis on telling recipients about time limits, the use of social contracts to spell out recipients' responsibilities, procedures that make applications hard to complete, and an emphasis on minimizing caseloads in agency reports and employee evaluations. There may also be variants within this type: anti-dependency might be a central goal by itself (even though it is sometimes hard to achieve), or it may be a means to another end, such as minimizing program costs.
3. *Ensuring correct eligibility decisions.* A system high on this dimension would place emphasis on determining and verifying eligibility for benefits and on minimizing fraud

and error rates. Applicants may be asked to obtain and provide considerable and very specific documentation; employees may be evaluated primarily on the basis of error rates; and people with nonwelfare income may be treated as "error-prone" and face greater suspicion (perhaps by being required to report back more frequently). However, such systems need not always be harsh in their treatment of clients (as #2 might be); they should also be designed to ensure due process and fair treatment to all applicants by specifying, in formal and detailed rules, what procedures front-line workers should follow in handling cases.

4. *Family well-being.* A system high on this dimension may do as much as possible to assess and address problems affecting applicants and their families, including problems of physical or sexual abuse; drug or alcohol addiction; lack of adequate nutrition, housing, or medical care; poor school attendance by children; as well as specific obstacles affecting adults' ability to get and stay in the workforce. It may conduct relatively frequent impact evaluations, and its management information system may be specially designed to allow case managers to find information about all persons within a household.

5. *Influencing family structures and relationships.* Systems that highlight these goals would invest significant resources in programs designed to reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies, preserve two-parent families, and reduce the number of children born to parents on welfare. Counseling and educational programs might be stressed; reports might track indicators of changing family structures; and welfare workers may emphasize family caps and other disadvantages that would accrue if recipients were to have additional children.

6. *Minimizing program costs to state (or local) governments.* There are many ways in which governments may try to minimize their effective costs, and most of those methods will involve one or more of the goals already listed above. But if cost-minimization is the main goal, it may produce a certain "spin" on how other objectives are treated. Outside programs could be brought to bear on the state's welfare-to-work effort, especially where non-welfare federal dollars could be exploited to help absorb the costs of achieving federally mandated goals for the welfare population, even if it means that other constituencies would be undeserved. States might rely heavily on capitation arrangements in contracts with service providers, though with little concern about minimum standards for performance — or little ability to monitor those standards.

Our first analyses, based on the current round of research, will be released early in 1998. In these reports, we will say where the 21 states stand in implementing their welfare laws and the different purposes that underlie their management systems. Our basic premise is simple: Before welfare laws can affect work, dependency, poverty, or family well-being, they must first influence and infuse the governance systems responsible for delivering welfare services and benefits.

Public policy, of course, is what gets implemented. *Studying the capacity of state management systems to implement social policies is also and intrinsically a way to get at what these policies really are.* This assertion gets at an important point for the new outcomes-oriented paradigm of public administration. It is all well and good to motivate government agencies to achieve and measure results. But results of what? We need to know.

Put in a nutshell, unless you know what public policies actually are implemented, it is hard to decide whether you like their results. Some people will like welfare caseload reductions that are a function of hard-edge sanctioning. Others won't. The same applies to caseload reductions that occur in places in which welfare reforms involve enhanced child care and other social and employment services to families, such as intensive job readiness and placement activities and workfare jobs.

Disagreements reflected in current political and academic discussions of the causes of welfare caseload declines indicate to us that there is a lot more that needs to be known about the implementation of the historic 1996 national welfare reform law as it plays out in this big country.

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